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Them That Follow

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Them That Follow

Abstract

This is a film review of *Them That Follow* (2019) directed by Britt Poulton and Dan Madison Savage.

Keywords

Snake Handling, Pentecostalism

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Them That Follow (2019), dir. Britt Poulton and Dan Madison Savage

Pentecostal movements that handle snakes as part of their religious rituals are few in number, perhaps being only 40-100 congregations in Appalachia today. They base their practice on Mark 16:17-18: “And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” They believe that they can be healed by faith, and that God protects the faithful, so that it is a sign of their faith if they can handle a poisonous snake without being bitten. Nonetheless, they are often bitten and die, which is why snake handling as a religious practice is illegal in many states. Their view of this, however, is that in such cases their death is God’s will.

This film is not a docu-drama, as the directors pointed out in the Q and A; in other words, the story is fictional, and so one might wonder about the accuracy of its portrayal of these religious groups. However, they would claim that they made every effort to represent them fairly, in spite

of a few deliberate interpolations they admitted. One of these is when a man in the film requests that his fiancée wash his feet, apparently to establish his dominance, whereas in fact foot washing would usually be *mutual* between the partners at Christian weddings that include this as a sign of their service to each other. What is accurate in the film is the portrayal of a closed community that has faith in its leaders to the extent that they avoid going to the hospital for snake bites, preferring to trust in healing and faith, which often has disastrous consequences.

Mara, the pastor's daughter, trusts in this worldview as well, but everything changes for her when she becomes pregnant before marriage and conceals this from her family and fiancé (who is not the father). But of course the truth cannot be hidden forever. The father of her child wants to run away with her, but she resists leaving her religion and everything she knows behind. She does have faith, but she is not being allowed to live it in her own way, controlled as she is by a patriarchal culture. In the end, Mara and the other characters have to choose whether to believe that all should be left to God, or whether to save a life by going to a hospital. This choice forces her to choose whether to leave her community forever or trust that it knows best.

In this scenario, the characters repeatedly reference "being tested" as if their refusal to seek medical care was a sign of greater faith. However, I am put in mind of the temptation of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, in which the devil urges him to throw himself off a tower to show that God will save him. Jesus' reply is: "It is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:7, Luke 4:12). While one could constantly be "trusting in God" by refusing hospitals, perhaps God might want us to take better care of ourselves? Are they "being tested" about whether to go to a hospital, or are they in fact testing God to see if God will save them? I could also point out that the verses in Mark 16:17-18 that allegedly authorize snake handling are *not* in the earliest biblical manuscripts and appear to have been added later, while these verses

regarding Jesus' temptation are in the oldest versions we have of these Gospels. If one must be a biblical literalist, one should take care which passages are prioritized.

The filmmakers claim that they wanted to present these communities sympathetically rather than critically, but from the plot it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is a dangerous ritual that is rightly made illegal. Some might argue that religious groups have this right, but members of the community might also be coerced into it, as they are in the film. I have no problem with a cautionary narrative about snake handling, and this film depicts the characters with compassion while also showing the dangers of a blind faith that neglects to recognize our basic human duties to care for one another.